


1982

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Recommended Citation

Cone, Carl B. (1982) "The Genesis of John Jorrocks, Fox-'unter," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 3 : No. 3 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol3/iss3/3>

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The Genesis of John Jorrocks, Fox-'unter

Carl B. Cone

Readers and students of Robert Smith Surtees (1805-1864) have been in agreement that his fictional character John Jorrocks first appeared in 1831 in the *New Sporting Magazine*. E. D. Cuming, for example, says, "The birth of the great man coincided practically with that of the *New Sporting Magazine*."¹ The word "practically" refers to the fact that Jorrocks appeared in the third number of the magazine, July 1831; the first number came out in May. Surtees himself stated that Jorrocks "made his début" in July 1831. Writing as the Yorkshireman of the Jorrocks stories, Surtees says he "called him into existence." This statement also indicates July 1831, for that is when the Yorkshireman first appears.² Nevertheless, a close reading of Surtees's earlier work shows that the character of Jorrocks as a Cockney fox hunter gestated in Surtees's mind for nearly a year before the "birth."

Jorrocks and his creator Surtees have enjoyed a faithful if not a large following. Both were "dear" friends to their contemporary Thackeray. Expressing admiration for Surtees's sporting fiction, Kipling called him Charles Dickens "with horse-dung." Virginia Woolf praised his work. In *Faces in My Time*, the third volume of his memoirs, Anthony Powell writes admiringly of Surtees's ability to create characters who exemplified types in English society. The newly formed R. S. Surtees Society exists to offer homage and appreciation to Surtees.

Although Surtees wrote only about fox hunting and people associated with it in early and mid-Victorian England, and thereby limited his appeal to the reading public, the snobbery he saw in the chase, and caricatured and satirized, did not diminish the pleasure he found in the sport. He hunted for most of his life, as his father and grandfather and great-grandfather had done before him. After brief careers in London as a solicitor and an editor, he succeeded to the family estate in 1838 and spent the rest of his life as a landed gentleman in Durham County, fox hunting, superintending his property, serving as Justice of the Peace, and writing sporting novels, that is, fox-hunting novels. When he created characters in

his novels who personified the pretension he so detested, he was not demeaning fox hunting. He was simply writing about the life he knew best. His characters, as Powell says, represented types, both likeable and unlovely, to be found in other segments of English society and in such places as Mayfair, the City, Westminster, the Strand, the developing London suburbs, county towns, villages, cottages and country homes, and growing industrial cities. Social climbing or tuft hunting is not peculiar to fox hunters.

The Cockney fox hunter had a notable career riding to hounds. He appeared under the name of Jorrocks in the *New Sporting Magazine* between 1831 and 1836, and in 1838 was given an enduring place in English literature through a book, *Jorrocks' Jaunts and Jollities*, consisting of a selection of revised articles from the *New Sporting Magazine*. Readers who have never encountered Jorrocks should read this book before they turn to the others in which he appears, *Handley Cross* (1843) and *Hillingdon Hall* (1845).

On his appearance full-blown in 1831, Jorrocks is a hunter who has thrown or, rather more likely, eased a leg over a horse many times before. He is not a novice. We are left to deduce what we can about his origins and background from chance remarks here and there in the three books and in the magazine pieces in which he appears. That he is a true Cockney is clear enough. He started his business life, he said, "with £500 and a share in a retail oyster shop," and "I am now [June 1832] worth upwards of half a plumb."³ This is an interesting statement. Jorrocks had a better start in life than is commonly thought. Half a plumb was £50,000. Jorrocks was able to afford time off, horses, and hunting. In 1831 his business is thriving; he has a reputation as an honest man, among his country clients as well as in the City; he is a dedicated fox hunter, grown stout, somewhere between eighteen and twenty "stun."

About Jorrocks's wife, a sometime Tooting beauty, there are even fewer hints or chance remarks to seize upon. Apparently at liberty to spend Jorrocks's money, she drapes herself in bright, free flowing gowns, turbans and feathers, spangles and ribbons and gewgaws so that, as Jorrocks said, she looks like a walking pawnshop. But one with still a pretty face. She stands up to Jorrocks, and now and then threatens to see her solicitor about "diworce." She is not a downtrodden woman.

In Jorrocks's time, but not for much longer, there was a

surprising openness in fox-hunting society. Anyone not particularly obnoxious who respected the fox-hunting code of etiquette could join a subscription hunt. It was not remarkable in itself that Surtees presented as his best-known character a Cockney grocer who lived in Great Coram Street (in the vicinity where Dickens and Powell lived for a while), did business in St. Botolph's Lane, and went out from London with other City men to ride to hounds with the kind of passion and devotion his Cumberland contemporary, John Peel, displayed with his hounds and horn in the morning. Some people criticized Jorrocks for indulging in sport. "Now, what folks says about me I don't care two-pence. . . . I stuck to the shop for five-and-thirty years, and its [sic] high time I should do a little recreation."⁴

Jorrocks reached the height of his remarkable hunting career when, at the age of sixty-three, he accepted an invitation to become Master of Fox Hounds at Handley Cross.⁵ Even the great Pomponius Ego, Surtees's caricature of Charles James Apperley (Nimrod), author of *The Chace, the Turf, and the Road* (1837), was not, said Jorrocks, "an M.F.H. like me." He had attained this station of eminence, he asserted, after a long career as "a hardent follower of the chase": at last "greatness has been thrust upon me when I shines forth an M.F.H." If a Cockney fox hunter was not a contradiction in Surtees's time, a Cockney Master of Fox Hounds certainly was, or would have been for any novelist but Surtees and any Cockney hunter but John Jorrocks. Anything was possible with them, and when they were together, anything was probable, but not necessarily acceptable. One reason the novel in which Jorrocks "shines forth an M.F.H.," *Handley Cross*, was not popular was that the phenomenon of a Cockney M.F.H. was too exceptional to be credible.

It is not certain whether advancing age and infirmities suddenly (but not yet in *Handley Cross*) caught up with Jorrocks, or whether the heavy burden of his awesome responsibilities for the pack and hunt of Handley Cross bore him down. At any rate, two years after he and Mrs. Jorrocks descended from the train at Datton Station on his first journey to his new dignity, Jorrocks and his stout spouse appear in *Hillingdon Hall* in Devon. He is retired from business and from the chase, the new owner of a not quite stately home, ready to begin a rural life as an agriculturist and soon thereafter to win a bizarre election to the House of Commons.⁶ Surtees was wise to end the story of John Jorrocks with *Hillingdon*

Hall. Whatever he might have been as an M.P., it is better to know him as the Cockney fox hunter. His gaffes as an M.P. would have reduced him to a pitiable character; as an M.F.H., his gaffes could only have evoked secret mirth. No reader would enjoy derisive treatment of Jorrocks.

Surtees knew Jorrocks's opinion: "Vot's an M.P. compared to an M.F.H.?" There were over six hundred M.P.'s but only about one hundred Masters of Fox Hounds. An M.P. was subject to constant criticism; an M.F.H. enjoyed universal respect. In Jorrocks's immortal words when he invited himself to spend the night at Pluckwelle Park, since Handley Cross was too far for a return home after dinner, "Where the M.F.H. dines he sleeps and where the M.F.H. sleeps he breakfasts." So he would take his nightcap with him when he drove over to Pluckwelle Park to look at Sir Archibald Depecarde's "quadruped." Jorrocks's exalted opinion of an M.F.H. suited Surtees, for he could write with confidence in his knowledge about fox-hunting society, but not about high political life.

Whatever personal qualities the lovable Jorrocks displayed, he is preeminently a comic figure, in many ways reminiscent of Mr. Pickwick, who made his appearance five years after Jorrocks. It is inconceivable that when he began to write of the adventures of the Pickwickians, Dickens had not read the Jorrocks pieces in the *New Sporting Magazine*.

The origin of Jorrocks goes back beyond the *New Sporting Magazine*, however. In the *Sporting Magazine* for August 1830 Surtees, continuing for that periodical a series of hunting tours through southern England, had given an account of a run with Mr. [John Augustus] Sullivan's stag-hounds on 9 March 1830 in country lying between Uxbridge and Windsor.⁷ Surtees rode his horse to the assembly place at Tattersall's farm about fourteen miles west of Hyde Park Corner. "I took a 'Cockneyshire' friend with me, who had lately purchased a hunter of me, but himself had never seen a hound of any sorts, and, by bumping about in the riding-school, had acquired a pretty stiff military seat, ill adapted for riding across a country." In *Handley Cross*, Jorrocks, "a natural born sportsman . . . had taken to hunting as soon as he could keep a horse." According to the article in the *Sporting Magazine*, he began riding to hounds precisely on 9 March 1830. The novice Cockney hunter on his way to the Tattersall farm in the company of his knowing young mentor, Surtees, "was a very apt pupil indeed; and

before I had got him through Hammersmith I had shortened his stirrups considerably, and given him a few directions about putting his horse fairly to his leaps, and never to mind a tumble—so long as he did not break his neck—and to stick by his horse if he wished his horse to stick by him, &c. &c." After he passed his novitiate, even when mounted on Xerxes or Arterxerxes, Jorrocks did not jump fences, preferring to look for gates, and he often took the road if that kept him in touch with the hunt. In the hills of Surrey, members of the Surrey Hunt often preferred a spot on a hilltop from which to watch the hounds work below.

Surtees and his unnamed Cockney friend were separated during the hunt from Tattersall's. His horse having cast a shoe, Surtees gave up the chase and returned alone to London after getting the shoe replaced. Next day he went round to his friend's stable and learned from the groom that neither his Cockney friend nor his horse had been seen there. Coming to the friend's brother's house, Surtees learned that the brother had gone off to Eton. Surtees then imagined the brother attending to the Cockney friend's "remainders" after some dreadful hunting accident. Surtees rushed to the friend's "lodgings." There he was, calmly "eating eggs and muffins for his breakfast."

"It seems" that the friend had accomplished the first part of the hunt "in good style without a single fall." Then someone informed the oblivious Cockney that his horse had lost both fore-shoes. The Cockney left the horse at Windsor for repairs and took the coach back to London. The brother, "from want of amusement," next day went to act the part of groom and ride the horse up to town.

During his moments of despair before he learned the facts, Surtees resolved "never to take another Cockney out hunting." But—"I am sorry to say my good resolution failed me the first time it was tried; for about a fortnight after I found my friend at my side again, going to the 'Epping Hunt'!!!"⁸

Here in the *Sporting Magazine* in August 1830 was the future John Jorrocks, unformed and malleable. The Cockney friend in 1830 was apparently wealthy and a man of leisure, as was his brother. Two decades earlier in the hands of the sporting writer Pierce Egan, such a Londoner might have been a member of the Fancy, a Corinthian interested in pugilism, not fox-hunting. The Cockney's nascent passion for hunting, his good fortune in meeting the fox-hunting Surtees and buying a horse from him, his subjection to Surtees's tutelage, shaped his life and made his fame.

When strain appeared in Surtees's relationship with the proprietors of the *Sporting Magazine*, he severed connections and entered into a new venture. His last piece in the *Sporting Magazine* appeared in January 1831, and in May appeared the *New Sporting Magazine*, a rival, with Rudolph Ackermann as publisher and Surtees as editor. Surtees was also hunting correspondent, continuing the accounts of hunting tours he had written under the name of Nim South for the old *Sporting Magazine*. But his position as editor freed him from former restrictions and he could indulge himself.

The Cockneyshire hunter had remained in Surtees's mind taking form and clear shape and character. There is one major difference between the unnamed hunter and Jorrocks, and it shows that Surtees had serious intentions for Jorrocks. The Cockneyshire friend, a shadowy, tentative person, went on two hunts, and they were stag hunts. John Jorrocks, on the other hand, was a fox hunter. Surtees was a devoted fox hunter and had little good and not much at all to say about stag hunting. There never could have been a John Jorrocks, stag 'unter.

Here is how Jorrocks appeared in 1831 in the *New Sporting Magazine* to "a Yorkshireman" who would be his companion in many jaunts and jollities, and to readers. The Yorkshireman was in Covent Garden at seven o'clock of a February morning waiting

for the friend who had seduced me into this most extraordinary predicament; when, all at once, my astonished eyes were confounded by the appearance of a man in a huge antique red frock-coat, with a dark collar, white mother-of-pearl buttons, with black foxes engraved or painted upon them, breeches that would have been spurned by the worthy master of the Hurworth, and boots (that looked as if they were made to tear up the very land and soil) tied round the knee with pieces of white tape, the flowing ends of which dangled over the mahogany tops. The wearer (who at first I took for a mounted general postman) was on a most becoming steed, with a snaffle-bridle in his mouth, decorated with a noseband and an ivory ring under his jaws to keep the reins together, the saddle was 'bran-new', and in his right hand he clenched the iron handle of a most tremendous horse-whip, the very sight of which, in the hands of a misguided man, would be enough to make the blood curdle in one's

veins.

At a sight so unexpected I was completely 'thrown in a heap' and the horseman had pulled up by my side, ere I recognized the friendly features of my old friend Jorrocks.⁹

In *Jorrocks' Jaunts and Jollities*, which was published seven years after the "birth" of Jorrocks in 1831, Surtees does not introduce Jorrocks in this fashion. He assumes that his readers already know Jorrocks. The passage just quoted appears, much altered, in the second chapter of *Jorrocks' Jaunts*, but recast as a description of a person already known, not an introduction of him. Jorrocks in 1838 needed no introduction.¹⁰

Thus came into existence one of the great comic characters of English literature. The shadowy, nameless Cockney friend of the *Sporting Magazine* appeared in the *New Sporting Magazine* as the robust, assertive, commanding yet naive John Jorrocks, the potential M.F.H. and M.P. Jorrocks, not a timid person, was aware of his fame when he composed his own epitaph: "Mr. J. was a celebrated fox-'unter and lecturer on 'unting."¹¹

NOTES

¹R.S. Surtees, *The Hunting Tours of Surtees*, ed. E.D. Cuming (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), p. xxiv.

²Robert Smith Surtees (*Creator of "Jorrocks"*), 1803-1864. By Himself and E.D. Cuming (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 85; Robert Smith Surtees and John Jorrocks, *Thoughts on Hunting and Other Matters*, ed. E.D. Cuming (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 202.

³"Thoughts on Hunting. . . . By Mr. Jorrocks," *New Sporting Magazine* 3, no. 14 (June 1832): 103.

⁴*Ibid.*, no. 15 (July 1832): 182.

⁵The most specific dating I have found for a man who was coy about his age is in an article in the *New Sporting Magazine* 10, no. 57 (January 1836): 163. A piece entitled "Letters from the North by Mr. Jorrocks," pp. 163-74, was dated December 1835, and on its first page Jorrocks gives his age as fifty-six. This, incidentally, was the last mention of Jorrocks in the *New Sporting Magazine* during Surtees's editorship. He did not leave the magazine until the end of the year when his "The Editor's Farewell," dated 1 December 1836, appeared. *Ibid.*, 11, no. 68 (December 1836): 523-26.

⁶There is reason to suspect physical decline. In 1834 (age 55) he went to Cheltenham after feeling "very poorly indeed of indigestion, as he calls it," and a year later he went to Sedgfield in the north of England for the

same reason. There he wrote the "Letters from the North," of which only number one appeared. By the time *Hillingdon Hall* began to appear (1843) as articles in the *New Sporting Magazine*, his "indigestion" or whatever it was might have bothered him still more. By the time the articles appeared as a book (1845), even that "hardent follower of the chase," now sixty-five, had given up riding to hounds. Though no more of Jorrocks appeared in print, we may infer that Surtees did not think his infirmities would disqualify him from service in the House of Commons. Jorrocks was a practical man; his age and weight presented problems for even the most "hardent" fox hunter, and common sense governed.

⁷*Sporting Magazine* 76 (August 1830): 292-304.

⁸This was a Londoners' hunt with perhaps the largest membership and most "democratic," or least aristocratic, character of all hunts. "Handley Cross; or the Spa Hunt," *Quarterly Review* 71, no. 142 (March 1843): 395. See also Thomas Hood, "The Epping Hunt." It was a stag hunt.

⁹*New Sporting Magazine* I, no. 3 (July 1831): 177.

¹⁰Of the Jorrocks pieces that appeared irregularly in the *New Sporting Magazine* from July 1831 to January 1836, some were revised and collected for the book, *Jorrocks' Jaunts*. It is not accurate to say that they were merely "reprinted," Leonard Cooper, *R.S. Surtees* (London: Arthur Barker, 1952), p. 59. They were recast, reworded, and in parts rewritten, and the sequence was changed. The introduction to the 1843 edition, p. xiii, specifies revision. Surtees himself said only "collected and published," Himself and E.D. Cuming, *Surtees*, pp. 85-86. Comparison of the *New Sporting Magazine* articles with the book *Jorrocks' Jaunts* shows the changes.

¹¹Quoted in Cooper, *R.S. Surtees*, p. 102.